



DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

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**OHMVR COMMISSION MEETING
Holtville, CA 92250**

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STAFF REPORT: Ocotillo Wells District Program Overview
STAFF: Garratt Aitchison, District Superintendent
SUBJECT: Ocotillo Wells District Overview

Summary

The following provides an overview of the Ocotillo Wells District's unit structure, core program areas, and highlights a few recent successes and projects.

District Structure

The District is/will be comprised of two State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA) park units, two State Recreation Areas (SRA), and one unclassified state park property that is part of a multi-agency Preserve.

Within the new District structure, more than 100 full-time, intermittent and seasonal employees will comprise the staff that are responsible for administration, facilities, public safety, interpretation and education, and natural and cultural Resources. Although the three additional units come with current staffing that will allow for a smooth transition, the concept of shared responsibilities across park unit boundaries will be a focus of the strategic plan moving forward. Special attention will be given to ensure a separation of funding sources and will require additional accounting procedures. The end result will translate into greater, both in number and efficiency, services to the public.

In addition, there will be an increased level of investment in our staff through job and task sharing, co-training, and sharing knowledge and resources to accomplish the mission of the Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) and individual park units.

Ocotillo Wells SVRA will continue to serve as the District headquarters. The SVRA provides approximately 85,000 acres of diverse recreation. Although a few semi-developed camping areas are available, a majority of the visitors enjoy the option of dispersed camping throughout the park. In addition to camping and off-highway recreation, Ocotillo Wells SVRA is host to several special events, commercial filming, and military training.

The General Plan update will incorporate a multitude of mission-driven goals and guidelines that will focus management efforts on maintaining and improving programs and facilities. Expanding opportunities for mobile concessions, adding training tracks and features, as well as acquisition and developing a revenue program that directly benefits park programs are just a few of the General Plan goals.

Balancing recreation and resource protection is at the core of what we do on a daily basis. Whether its conserving habitat for species of special concern or consulting with our Native American partners on how best to protect the cultural resources, I would like to commend my staff for their stewardship.

Heber Dunes SVRA is a day use SVRA that primarily serves the communities in the El Centro region. Improvements to the facilities have been welcomed additions by the visitors and staff, and include a new ranger station, group picnic facility, and upgraded water systems and restrooms. Current projects include an outdoor classroom and loading ramps for off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreationists. The annual programs provided by Heber Dunes' interpretation and education staff are a staple at the surrounding elementary schools. We look forward to expanding our programs to include field trips to the park and utilizing messaging at Picacho and Salton Sea SRAs. Currently, more than 2,500 youth experience our programs through in-park and off-site education.

Picacho SRA is one of the most remote state park units and is located along the Colorado River, 140 miles southeast of Ocotillo Wells SVRA. This aquatic-friendly park is one of three park units that will be added to the District with operations being funded by State Park and Recreation Funds (SPRF) rather than OHV Trust Funds. The proximity of this park to Heber Dunes SVRA will allow for a networking of park resources that will improve services across all core program areas. The non-profit park partner, Friends4Picacho, is motivated to work with us through this transition and expand its role.

Salton Sea SRA is another SPRF-funded park unit that will be included in the Ocotillo Wells District. Although this park unit sits along the northern shoreline of the Salton Sea, it has been a popular Fall/Winter destination for campers, bird-watchers and boaters. The shrinking sea will however present challenges in the years to come. My staff will be actively participating in the various committees associated with the Salton Sea Management Program.

Boat launch access, habitat restoration, and community outreach and interpretation are among the topics that my staff will be working on. As the shoreline recedes and recreation trends change, we may also consider alternatives to the traditional activities that have taken place there. Ocotillo Wells SVRA and Salton Sea SRA will also be able to take advantage of their proximity to one another to improve core program efficiency and delivery.

Indio Hills Palms is just over 5,000 acres of unclassified park property that is part of the Coachella Valley Preserve. Located a few miles east of Palm Springs, the protected palm oases are popular destinations for hikers and equestrians. Staff will be working

closely with the Coachella Valley Preserve management agencies throughout the transition process.

Flat-Tailed Horned Lizard

Ocotillo Wells SVRA is one of several areas in the region that is home to the beloved flat-tailed horned lizard. For several years, staff have been actively involved in a multi-agency effort to conserve flat-tailed habitat as a signatory agency on the Rangeland Management Strategy (RMS). This includes monitoring, trapping, counting, and tagging lizard populations as well as implementing habitat conservation measures. The recent decision by the California Fish and Game Commission *not to list* the lizard as endangered or threatened is, in part, a result of the park's persistence in maintaining this program. Although the flat-tail horned lizard is not considered endangered or threatened, we will continue to incorporate RMS initiatives in managing the park.

In the Works ... Geothermal Project

The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) is a document that identifies state and federal lands that are potentially available for renewable energy projects. These areas are referred to as Development Focus Areas (DFA). Ocotillo Wells SVRA is a compilation of state and federal (BLM public) lands in which a portion of the SVRA has been identified as a DFA. Although there are different guidelines and requirements among state parks and BLM (subsurface mineral rights, existing leases, California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), etc.), permits have been issued to a geothermal company to begin the research phase to determine the existence and/or level of geothermal resources in this DFA. Of the approximate 15,000 acres being considered, 4,000 acres are state park lands. Cultural and natural resources surveys are underway that will determine paths of travel for the Vibroseis trucks. These trucks are used to map subsurface formations several thousand feet deep. This "mapping" will primarily take place east of Poleline Road and south of County Dump Road.

Although the county of Imperial has been identified as the lead CEQA agency, Ocotillo Wells SVRA staff will continue to play an active role throughout the survey and permitting process. Project timelines have not been completely determined but we do anticipate the Vibroseis testing to take place in late 2018 to early 2019.

Commission Action

For information only.

Attachments

None